



## **The Europeanization of Eurosceptics? A Hyperlink Network Analysis of the Sweden Democrats**

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## The Europeanization of Eurosceptics? A hyperlink network analysis of the Sweden Democrats

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The EU-critical parties have been represented in the European Parliament since the 1980s. However, it is in the 2014 EP elections that they have captured the highest amount of votes in the history of the EU legislative. In total, the number of Eurosceptic parliamentarians represented in the current parliament is 212 (out of a total of 751 MEPs), coming from 23 out of the 28 member states (Treib, 2014: 1542-43).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the, perhaps paradoxical, phenomenon of Europeanization of Eurosceptic parties and the role the internet played in this process. We focus on Ladrech's (2002) fifth dimension of the Europeanization of political parties, "relations beyond the national party system" and want to capture these cross-border connections through an analysis of the social network of Sweden Democrats, the flagship of institutionalized anti-EU critique in Sweden. We adopt the approach embraced by Miltner et al. (2013), among others, who argue that when studying web-based interactions, hyperlinks serve as good proxies for real-life, offline connections. Thus, we set out to map the virtual communicative connections between Sweden Democrats (SD) and other organizations who subscribe to the same anti-EU integration agenda.

We understand Eurosceptic parties to be those who are either critical of or in direct opposition to the process of European integration (Hooghe and Marks, 2007). There are numerous ideological nuances within this broadly defined political group. For example, the intensity of the anti-EU positions can vary from a desire to reform the current shape of the supranational institutions to a plan to completely stop or even reverse the process of integration, two positions that correspond to what De Wilde et al. (2013) call alter- and anti-European. The Eurosceptic parties vary also in what regards the object of their critique: either (all or some of) the EU institutions and their present-day make-up or the principle of integration itself, leading to a more diffuse or more specific opposition (Kopecký and Mudde, 2002). Lastly, Eurosceptic sentiment is not an explicitly right-wing phenomenon, with criticism emerging equally forcefully from the left side of the political spectrum (see for example March and Rommerskirchen, 2012; Halikiopoulou et al., 2012). Thus, Euroscepticism cannot be considered a unitary phenomenon and Eurosceptic party politics cannot be assumed to possess a strong ideological cohesion.

At the same time, the European Union offers pragmatic incentives for parties of all colors to collaborate at the supra-national level, in the form of financing programs aimed at European parties and, within the Parliament, European party groups. Moreover, the EP represents an

arena where parties of similar persuasion can meet, discuss and share policy positions, an additional push for more Europeanization.

The main research questions of the paper are:

Which actors are connected to the Sweden Democrats and how are they networked online? Does SD's social network reach outside the national borders of Sweden and if so, who are their international connections? What role do Social Networking Sites (SNSs) play in linking the Sweden Democrats with other actors and do they facilitate a transnational communicative network of Eurosceptics?

## 1. Background: Sweden and Political Communication Online

We decided to focus on Sweden because it has several features that are suitable for an hyperlink network analysis: a high density of internet use, a politically active population as reflected in voter turnout and many politicians and political parties with a web presence (Larsson and Kalsnes, 2014). Swedish politicians appear to be active on social media sites and use them to reach out to voters (Moe and Larsson, 2013). However, there is a gap in the literature on the active use of the internet for political purposes in Sweden, as most studies do not differentiate between mainstream and fringe parties, and thus do not give special attention to such organizations as the Sweden Democrats, despite wide-spread assumptions that radical organizations, challenging the established order, are more likely to bypass the selection bias usually associated with traditional media (Koopmans and Zimmermann, 2010) and to use the web to reach out, communicate, mobilize supporters and thus politicize their core issue, placing them on the agenda.

The Sweden Democrats have politicized the EU in addition to running on a national platform of constraining a generous immigration and multiculturalism policy. We consider Sweden Democrats to be challengers to the mainstream political system in Sweden. Despite their presence in the Riksdag, the national legislative, and in the European Parliament, and despite their position as country's third largest party, the SD has continued to challenge the accepted rules of the political game (for example when they almost brought down the Social Democratic/Green government by refusing to accept a budget supporting increased migration). The other parties, regardless of political color, coalesced against the Sweden Democrats and agreed to a compromise that de facto removes the power of SD to play kingmaker. Even if technically SD is not a typical challenger, i.e. an actor "who do[es] not have routine access to the decision-making arena" (Kriesi, 2004: 196) the fact that mainstream parties refuse to collaborate with it at the national level and that the traditional media (newspapers, TV, radio) treat it in a biased fashion (Hellström and Nilsson, 2010) qualify it as a challenger or fringe party.

From the perspective of the Europeanization of relations with parties and institutions beyond the national political arena, the Sweden Democrats do not show at the outset an obvious

success in creating transnational ties. It is only in 2014 that they gained one mandate in the European Parliament and it took a long time for them to become part of a viable party group. After pre-electoral negotiations with the National Front (France) failed, SD ended up in the newly renamed group Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy, a descendent of the Europe of Freedom of Democracy (2009-2014), where SD joined parties such as UKIP (UK), Five Star Movement (Italy), Order and Justice Party (Lithuania), plus two independent parliamentarians from France and Poland respectively (Efdgroup, 2014). The EFDD group, representing 'hard line' Eurosceptics, has a total of 46 MEPs.

Research shows that the formation of EP groups is grounded first and foremost by ideology (Bressanelli, 2012) and only to a secondary degree by pragmatic considerations (even though these cannot be neglected, as it is illustrated by the case of the British Conservatives leaving the EPP group (Maurer et al., 2008) or by the case of the UKIP, joining the Europe of Freedom and Democracy (2009-2014) seen as a supplementary source of campaign financing (Whitaker and Lynch, 2014)). Judging by the composition of the EFDD, its ideology is clearly opposed to European integration, but beyond their critical stance against the EU there is not a strong internal cohesion among the members of the party group.

The Sweden Democrats belong also to a European political party, the European Alliance for Freedom (EAF), whose membership does not overlap with that of the EFDD group. The EAF counts among its members the following parties, besides SD: Vlaams Belang (Belgium), Front National (France), FPÖ (Austria), Citizens in Rage (Germany), plus two independent members (one from Malta, the other from the UK) (Foundation Robert Schuman, 2014).

Judging by this participation, there is an expectation that the Sweden Democrats are embedded in several networks of organizations sharing their ideological standpoints and thus that they are Europeanized.

## 2. Tracing the Europeanization of Eurosceptic political parties

The Europeanization of party politics has taken place following the two basic strategies of double adoption: of the domestic to the European and of the European to the domestic/national, what Börzel defines as uploading vs. downloading (Börzel, 2002).

On one hand, we have seen the birth of European political parties, partly financed by the EU, which are not the same thing as the traditional federations of national parties. EU's efforts to create viable party representation at the European level also counted the creation of party groups in the European legislative, following the model of domestic politics. Elected parliamentarians enjoy higher visibility and can affect politics more if they join one such group (presently the EP has seven party groups, ideologically centered).

The other dimension of the Europeanization process is aimed at national political parties, who have not escaped the Brussels effect, but have dealt with it indirectly. The Union does

not offer enough incentives or “opportunity structures” for national parties to Europeanize (Ladrech, 2009: 7). Despite this, however, parties in member states saw their internal organization slowly changing under the pressure of European integration (Poguntke et al., 2007; Ladrech, 2002), and their ideological agendas transformed as to include a new, European, dimension that varied along a pro-contra axis (Hix, 1999).

Empirical studies have focused on the changes induced by the EU in the organizational structure, agenda structure and even post-electoral coalition building of parties participating in the EU elections (Mair, 2007). Other studies have also looked at the effects of linkages between parties represented in the national legislatures and the European Parliament, revealing that personal contacts between national MPs and MEPs of the same party are the main communication channel, followed by communication between national MPs with MEPs from sister parties. However, party ideology plays a role: the Austrian Eurosceptics, FPÖ, have a harder time to use the vertical communication channel to the EP because their party was not member of any parliamentary group there before 2014 (Miklin, 2012: 32).

As in Miklin’s article cited above, based on the case of Austria, most of the studies took the nation as the unit of analysis. In this paper we argue that the Europeanization process has effects beyond the national borders and that the adaptation to European institutions and their demands has resulted in a reconfigured political environment where parties, even those opposed principally to the EU, are compelled to communicate, coordinate and even cooperate and inspire each other, at least during the campaign for European elections (Lilleker et al., 2011). The consequences of this process of rapprochement may survive the election period and the links developed during the EP campaign may be maintained in the longer run, at least at the EP level. Especially in the context of the Eurocrisis, there is a great mobilization potential of the anti-European segments of national publics across the continent: “the internet is an excellent medium to reach out, mobilize and organize supporters and activists”(Kiouisis and Strömbäck, 2014).

We argue that the internet has played a very important role in the process of Europeanization of party politics. The communicative potential of the Internet is fundamentally changing how political matters are communicated to the public (Canel and Voltmer, 2014). The internet has not only become normalized as a source of news in the daily life of citizens, it has also become an organizing tool for political mobilization. Conventional forms of political engagement are challenged, for example, by citizen’s ability to circumvent traditional political dissemination. Moreover the Internet, as a non-spatial digital architecture, allows for the public to easily and cheaply access media reporting from other countries and media providers. However, most studies have focused on the citizen or on the media levels, as part of a rather loosely defined European public sphere (Trenz et al., 2014; De Wilde et al., 2013; Risse, 2014). In the present study we endeavor to connect the media and the citizen to the party actors involved in any political communication. We are

interested in the relationship between the Europeanization of political parties and a potentially corresponding Europeanization of public spheres.

We find Eurosceptic parties to be particularly interesting to test the idea of Europeanization as the idea of a transcontinental alliance of nationalists is counterintuitive. If we can document that these parties used the internet as a vehicle for interaction, then the claim that the Internet and SNSs foster Europeanization has more generalization strength as it is to be expected that other parties with more coherent ideological platforms would also be likely to engage in the same practices. So far, Eurosceptic parties have been treated nationally (Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008). We would like to focus on the cross-border communication of these parties and examine whether they indeed can be subscribed to one party family. They are also attractive because it appears that at the national level at least some of these parties have already been adept users of the Internet in their campaigns<sup>1</sup>.

There is a considerable literature on the formation of party groups in the EP and within it there are several studies that focus on the Eurosceptics (in various configurations)(Almeida, 2010;Brack, 2012;Whitaker and Lynch, 2014;Brack, 2013;Stattin, 2010). The basic point of the literature is that ideological cohesion is needed for a well-functioning EP group and that Eurosceptic often lack this tight connection. At the same time, all this literature has used more traditional methods in identifying party cooperation at the EU level (interviews, records of legislative procedures, voting records etc.) and none has approached the matter through this hyperlink network approach. Our novel contribution is to apply hyperlink network analysis to the case of the Swedish Eurosceptics in order to explore the extent and manner of their potential Europeanization.

### 3. Research design and method

Our research design focuses on digital communication and is built around a hyperlink network analysis of the Eurosceptic political party Sweden Democrats. We base this approach on the expectation that “politics is likely to change as the Internet becomes ever more assimilated into everyday political activity”(Farrell, 2012).

Hyperlinks have been referred to as ‘the essence of the Internet’ (cite) and can be divided into two groups: internal and external hyperlinks. Internal hyperlinks facilitate the navigation of a single web page, whereas external hyperlinks link two distinct web pages together. Regarding the latter, externally hyperlinked sites signify that “a form of cognitive, social, or structural relationship exists between the sites” (Park, 2003: 10) that can, among others, suggest “ties of affinity, paths of communication, tokens of mutual aid in achieving

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in the recent 2014 EP elections, the Eurosceptic Italian Five Star Movement, campaigning on a populist agenda of plebiscitary voting processes using the Internet, propelled itself into the position of the second largest party in Italy. For a comparative study see Treib, O., 2014, “The Voter Says No, but Nobody Listens: Causes and Consequences of the Eurosceptic Vote in the 2014 European Elections”. *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 21, 1541-54.

public recognition, and/or potential avenues of coordination” (Burris et al., 2000: 215). Succinctly put, hyperlinking is the definitive form of Internet communication; without hyperlinking the internet would not be a communicative network.

A focus on hyperlinks skirts a number of methodological challenges posed by other digital communicative architectures. First, hyperlinking is the structural glue holding the ‘Net’ together and is therefore unlikely to fundamentally change. Second and related to the first, hyperlinking transcends traditional communication paradigms such as language. Social media use has national variations and subsequently empirical limitations, but hyperlinking is a universal method of connectivity between actors. Third, hyperlinks are “public displays of connection” (Rogers, 2013: 96), meaning that their linkages are openly available on the web - not the property of a developer or company.

Furthermore, in theory, hyperlinking circumvents traditional power-relations and is thus suitable for the study of social challengers (i.e. social movements, civil society actors or fringe parties) since “communicative structures emerge from numerous discrete acts of actors who decide independently to which other actors they want to provide hyperlinks and which to not” (Koopmans and Zimmermann, 2010: 175). However in practice, certain actors can increase their web influence via a number of ways, including: paying for increased visibility through advertisements, having a highly developed (and networked) web presence, or being linked to by a number of other influential actors, thus increasing their prominence in search engine results.

Our research design uses hyperlink network analysis to identify and visually map the actor-network structures underlying the communication flows of the Sweden Democrats. We follow Park in conceptualizing hyperlink network analysis as “an extension of traditional communication networks” that “follows the structure of a social system based on the shared hyperlinks among websites” (Park, 2003: 51). We assume that hyperlinks are “socially significant” (Hsu and Park, 2011: 355) as linking is a form of social practice. As Rogers states, “Making a link to another site, not making a link, or removing a link, may be viewed as acts of association, non-association or disassociation, respectively” (Rogers, 2010: 117).

We are specifically interested in how the Sweden Democrats are connected online within Sweden and vis-à-vis other national Eurosceptic parties. In order to trace the hyperlink network of the Sweden Democrats, we used the network location and visual mapping software ‘Issuecrawler’ ([www.govcom.org](http://www.govcom.org)). The Issuecrawler begins from a starting list of URLs compiled by the user, and follows these hyperlinks outwards from the ‘starting points’.

#### 4. Exploring hyperlink networks

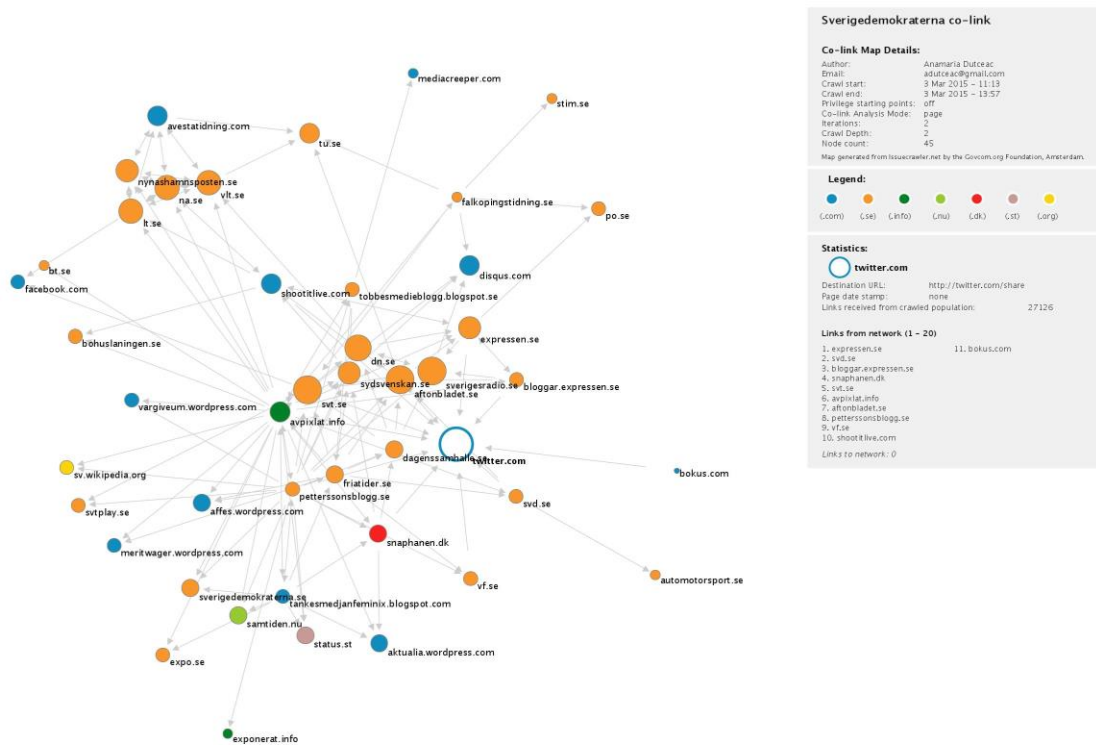
In order to explore the virtual connections between the Sweden Democrats and other actors in the Swedish online public domain, we started by doing a co-link analysis using as starting points the homepage of the party ([www.sverigedemokraterna.se](http://www.sverigedemokraterna.se)) together with its affiliated organizations, several blogs written by SD politicians, as well as the Facebook and Twitter pages of prominent SD public figures. We also included online news aggregators generally regarded as sympathetic to SD's message.

During a co-link analysis, the Issuecrawler follows the hyperlinks outwards from the starting points and retains only those URLs shared by at least two of the starting points. We chose a 'depth' and 'iteration' level of two, meaning that the Issuecrawler retrieved the URLs immediately outlinked from the starting points (depth 1) as well as the URLs linked to by those pages (depth 2). Once the two levels of URLs were retrieved, a co-link analysis was performed (iteration 1), whereby URLs receiving at least two links were saved as new starting points while the others were filtered out. The software then repeated the process to complete the second iteration.

All the crawls we performed were of the static, "one-moment-in-time" type. Thus the diagrams resulting from our investigations have a limited validity, restricted to the time period when they were effectuated (March 2015). This limitation could be addressed by doing dynamic crawls that repeat the same procedure at established intervals.

The resulting 'Cluster Map' (Figure 1) displays the retrieved webpages as 'nodes', and marks the connections between them as directed arrows, known as 'edges', that show whether the node was in- or out-linked.





[Figure 1]

The Sweden Democrats are located at the periphery of the hyperlink network. The immediate neighborhood of SD consists of blogs and news aggregators that largely deal with issues similar to those of SD's political agenda. The proximity of nodes, while signifying the similarity between them, does not necessarily translate to agreement about an issue. For example, Expo.se is the homepage of a research foundation critical of the ideological positions held by SD.

The graph shows three inlinks to the SD node. One, avpixlat.info, is a news aggregator and forum. The other two, tankesmedjanfeminix.blogspot.com and petterssonsblogg.se, are anonymously edited blogs. All three websites espouse views critical of Sweden's mainstream politics and media, current immigration policies, and EU integration. These views, generally regarded in Sweden as politically incorrect, also form the core of SD's political platform.

Swedish mainstream media outlets comprise the core of the graph, and their large size indicates a high amount of incoming links. The mainstream media are densely interconnected and are also linked to by many of the other nodes, demonstrating that mainstream media are main actors in the production and dissemination of information about SD. No direct links exist on the graph between the core and SD. The process of news

production can explain this lack of hyperlink connectivity. Unlike blogs, mainstream media have the capacity to generate new content from interviews, reportages, and press conferences. Their access to real world information limits the need to extract information from online sources. The high number of outlinking from Avpixlat.info, also close to the core, shows how an online news aggregator is limited to drawing information from other webpages and online blogs. Avpixlat also links to a cluster of densely interconnected sites belonging to Swedish local newspapers in the top-left of the graph; however, these local webpages are further removed from SD's placement on the graph.

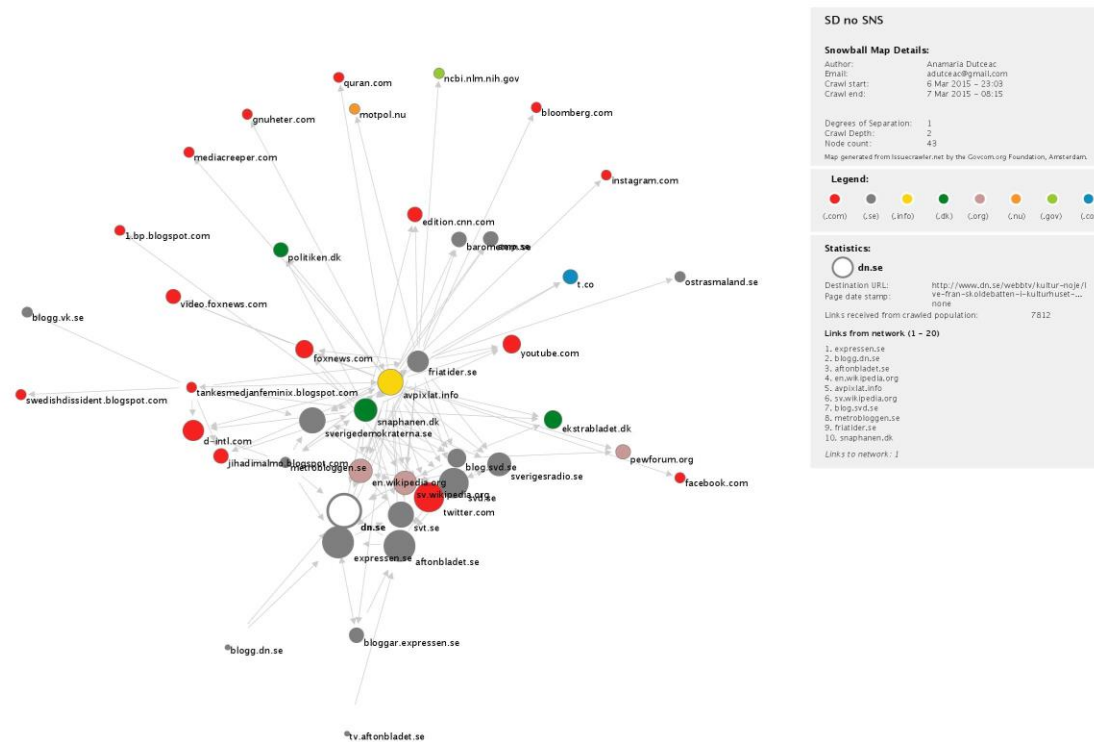
The largest node, twitter.com, is exclusively inlinked and is one of the key meeting places for hyperlinks in the network. This can be explained by at least three factors. First, the Issuecrawler algorithm is designed to follow hyperlinks but not necessarily individual Tweets. Second, many sites link to Twitter either through accounts or presenting the option to 'share' a posting, and therefore the Issuecrawler is likely to retain twitter.com in a co-link analysis. Third, we included the hyperlinks of leading SD figures' Twitter accounts in our starting points. We also included the Facebook pages of those same figures, when possible, into our starting points; however, facebook.com lies on the periphery of our network with only two inlinks. All the inlinks to Twitter and Facebook come from either media sources or news aggregators, and the higher number of inlinks to Twitter may be explained by online media's preference for Twitter as a source of breaking news.

Our intention in performing a hyperlink network analysis was to assess the degree of internationalization of the Sweden Democrats. The Issuecrawler can uncover hyperlink connections outside of the starting points and reveal unexpected online relationships between actors (Rogers, 2010). Indeed, out of our 38 starting points, only few were retained in our co-link analysis. We did not find many connections with non-Swedish actors, with the exception of social media sites and the Danish news blog snaphanen.dk. We had included snaphanen.dk as one of our starting points due to its special relationship with the Southern Swedish region of Scania, and its inclusion in the final result confirms our expectation that the Danish site is relevant to SD's ideological domain. However, we did not uncover any other international webpages to situate SD as part of a larger Europeanization process.

In an attempt to broaden the scope of our hyperlink network analysis, we ran another webcrawl using the 'snowball' function of the software. In a snowball analysis, the Issuecrawler follows the starting points' outlinks based on the 'depth' setting input by the user. The Issuecrawler retains *all* the links found, as opposed to only shared links as in a co-link analysis. The snowball analysis is more inclusive than a co-link analysis, and therefore the generated network is more loosely-knit.

We kept the same starting points as our co-link analysis, but we removed all the Twitter and Facebook sites of SD figures to prevent the overrepresentation of social media sites. By setting the 'depth' to 2 and the 'degree of separation' to 1, the Issuecrawler followed the

starting pages outlinks (depth 1), crawled one more time from those outlinks (depth 2), and saved all the URLs without going further (degree of separation 1). The resulting hyperlink network (Figure 2) is presented below as a 'Cluster Map':



[Figure 2]

Indeed, the snowball analysis showed more international connectivity than the co-link analysis, but the number of nodes is similar in both cases (43 to 45, respectively). Of the international sites, a majority is based in the US and belongs to either news organizations (Foxnews, CNN, Bloomberg) or information sites (Pew Forum, US Center for Biotechnology Information) that are located on the periphery of the chart. Additionally, three Danish web pages are present: Snaphanen.dk, Politiken.dk, and Extrabladet.dk. The first is a political blog and was included as one of our starting points, whereas the latter two are mainstream media sources and were retrieved by the Issucrawler.

Like the co-link analysis, a densely interconnected Swedish media cluster is present, but has shifted away from the center in place of three alternative media sites with an ideological leaning aligned with the Sweden Democrats: Snaphanen.dk, Friatider.se, and Avpixlat.info. Avpixlat now represents the center of the graph and has also increased in node size. The Sweden Democrat node exhibits the same trend, receiving inlinks from six nodes; thus, the

snowball analysis increased the connectivity level of SD's homepage. Avpixlat and Tankesmedjanfeminix are present in both crawls, whereas Peterssensblogg is replaced by Friatider (an alternative media site with pro-SD tendencies), the blogs of SvD and Metro (two media sites), and the Swedish Wikipedia.

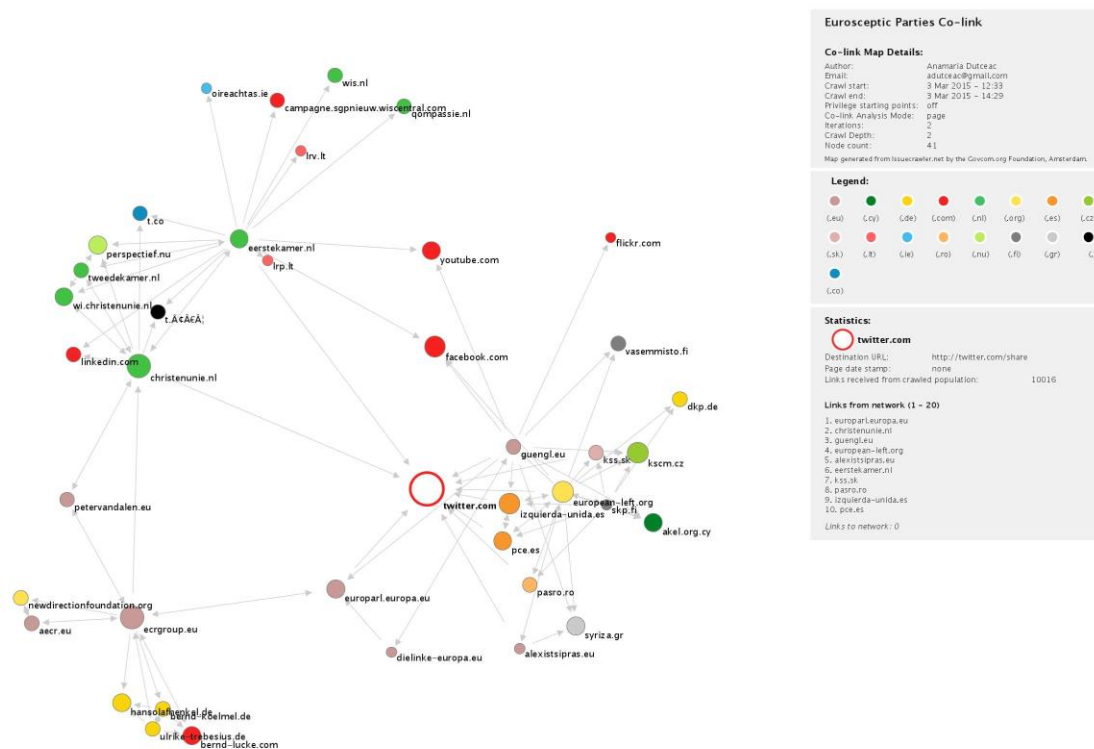
The Swedish local media cluster located on the periphery of the co-link analysis is no longer present; however, two new nodes were generated close to SD. One, D-intl.com, is a Swedish/Danish online alternative media outlet based in the Southern Sweden city of Malmo. The other, jihadimalmo.blogspot.com, is an Islam-critical blog also written from the same city.

In sum, the Issuecrawler did not reveal a high level of Europeanization for SD. The few European connections resided mostly in Denmark and is unsurprising given its close proximity to Scania in Southern Sweden, where SD support is highest. Continuing our search for the Europeanization of SD, we decided to take a new approach inspired by the literature on the collaboration of Eurosceptic parties in the parliament (Citations). Borrowing from Treib's (2014) compilation of all Eurosceptic parties in the EP following May 2014 elections, we created a list of starting points using the homepages for each party (N=47).<sup>2</sup>

We ran an Issuecrawler co-link analysis with a 'depth' and 'iteration' of 2, with the resulting Cluster Map (Figure 3) reproduced below:

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<sup>2</sup> Treib's list included 48 parties, but we did not find to separate homepages for Sinn Fein, who are in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.



[Figure 3]

Neither the Sweden Democrats, nor any parties from the EP party group Europe of Free and Direct Democracy (EFDD) were represented in the results from the Issuecrawler. However, the two sides of the map clearly distinguish clusters that are separated ideologically. The nodes on the left side of the map are clearly the webpages of conservatives, whereas the right side of the map contains nodes associated with the European left.

The homepage of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), a party group slightly less critical of European integration than the EFDD, can be seen in the lower left of the map. The ECR is interlinked with the Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists (AECR), a European political party affiliated with the ECR, and was linked to by The New Direction Foundation, the AECR's think tank. Below the ECR node is a small cluster of homepages of politicians from the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), a German Eurosceptic party part of the ECR.

The ECR is also linked to by the Dutch Christian Democratic Party, who are ECR members, and the Dutch MEP Peter van Dalen, who is interlinked to both the ECR and the Christian Democrats. The Christian Democrats are linked to by their party think tank,

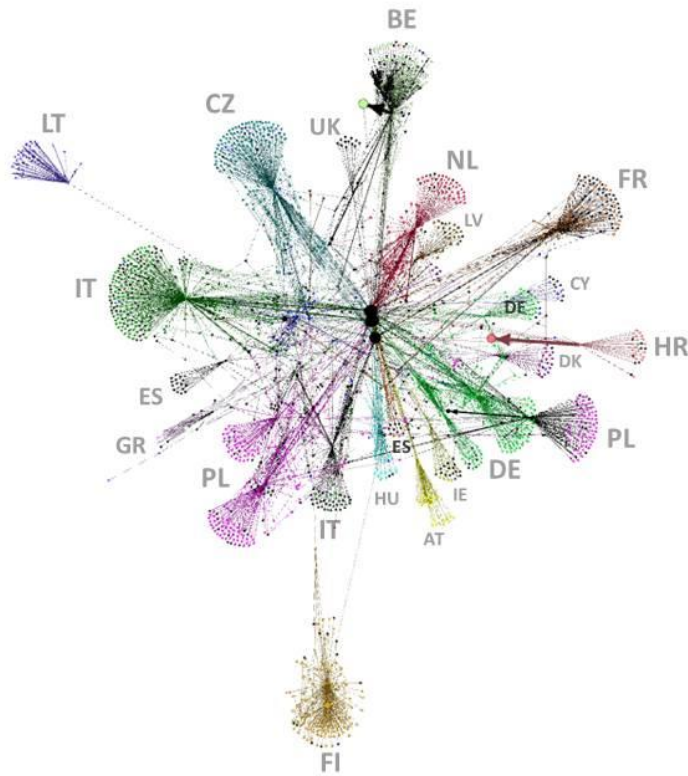
Perspectief. Also on the conservative side of the map are a number of national parliament homepages (Dutch, Irish, Lithuanian) and the webpage for the Lithuanian president's office.

The right side of the map clearly shows a cluster of national left-wing parties (Spain, Romania, Greece, Cyprus, Finland, Slovakia, Germany, Czech), linked to the European political party, Party of the European Left (EL). The EL is linked to by its respective Eurosceptic European Parliament party group, the United European Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL).

Linking the two ideological sides of the chart are three social media sites (Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube) and the European Parliament homepage. As in our first co-link analysis, Twitter is the largest node in the network, receiving only inlinks. This is partly explained by a technical construction detail, namely the presence on many sites of a Twitter-wall, a widget scrolling the latest three to five tweets from a specific feed. As this sidebar will often be displayed on all pages on a site, the weight given to Twitter links will be positively affected.

Since the Sweden Democrats did not appear in our Eurosceptic party co-link analysis, we performed one last crawl: a snowball analysis with the homepages of all Eurosceptic parties represented in the 2014 European Parliament as our starting points. Although we used the same 'depth' (2) and 'degree of separation' (1) settings as our first snowball analysis, the Issuecrawler did not generate a meaningful map. The center of our Cluster Map was bit.ly, a URL shortening service, and the remaining nodes were peripheral with little to none political significance. However, by looking at the retrieved list of links we could see the Issuecrawler had found 27,297 URLs, many of which were attached to the political parties included in our starting points.

We therefore exported the data from our crawl as .GEFX file and opened it in Gephi, an "interactive and exploration platform" for "networks and complex systems" ([www.gephi.github.io](http://www.gephi.github.io)). In Gephi, the .GEFX file showed 2,114 nodes and 4,574 edges. At first, the nodes and edges were clustered into an unreadable square, so we ran the Yifan Hu graph drawing algorithm to render the graph into a readable form. We colored the nodes according to Top Level Domain (TLD) name, the two to three letters at the end of a URL (e.g. .com, .org, .de, etc). All TLD's that are nation specific (e.g. .de [German], .fr [France], .pl [Poland]) and .eu [Europe]) were assigned colors, and all generic TLD's (e.g. .com, .org, .info) were colored black. The resulting Gephi visualization (Figure 4) is reproduced below:



[Figure 4]

The Gephi visualization shows a strong national clustering effect. X out of X Eurosceptic parties' homepages are represented on the map. Extending behind the party homepages are predominantly outlinks to party local chapters, affiliated individual politicians, and national news outlets. The size of these clusters varies significantly, from larger clusters like Italy's Five Star Movement to smaller ones such as the Danish People's Party, correlating to the number of outlinks identified by the Issuecrawler. Some Member States have more than one cluster (e.g. Poland, Germany), since more than one Eurosceptic party from these nations stand in the EP.

The graph displays very few linkages across clusters; the linkages that do exist are non-political technical sites (e.g. apple.com, mycookies.com). The sites with the TLD .eu, although close the center, do not serve as a facilitating domain for national cross-linking. However, the most central of the .eu sites is Europarl.eu, which is to be expected since our starting points were all parties sitting in the current EU parliament. At the very core of the map are three large, black nodes: Youtube, Facebook, and Twitter. The two outlying clusters, built around the True Finns and Latvia's Order and Justice, are the only two that do not link directly to the three core social media nodes.

Neither The Sweden Democrats nor any site with a TLD of .se, were included in the visualization, and hence a Swedish cluster does not appear on the map.

## 5. Interpretation of results

We designed our study to explore the Europeanization of Eurosceptic parties and the national public spheres to which they belong. Our Gephi visualization suggests that the online networks of these Eurosceptic actors remain nationally bound (pointing in the same direction as Almeida's (2010) research), and the hyperlink network analyses of the Sweden Democrats shows that their online relationships consists of national actors almost exclusively. If hyperlink networks are proxies for offline communication, this finding suggests that the Sweden Democrats are not networked within or outside the Sweden. The former can be explained by the lack of political parties associating with them, and a general societal stigmatization towards the party on account of their anti-immigration views within a pro-multicultural society. The lack of linkages outside Sweden can be explained by SD's low international presence, having only one MEP in the European Parliament and only relatively recently entering the Swedish parliament in 2010.

The exceptions were social media sites and a few Danish media sources. This Danish-Swedish connection can be explained by the region of Scania in Southern Sweden, which has close cultural and historical ties to neighboring Denmark.

Despite the participation of SD in the European party group EFDD, no links were uncovered between SD and the party group or its other national affiliates. Others have suggested that because European Parliament elections are structured nationally and are considered by the citizens as 'second-order' elections, national parties lack the political incentive to Europeanize (Green-Pedersen, 2012). These factors, coupled with the results of our study, support the idea that a European public sphere is unlikely to emerge supranationally; rather, national public spheres may Europeanize through cross-border communication (Risse, 2014: 3) or transnational media spaces. Despite the lack of European level linkage in our networks, we found slight evidence for cross-border communication through the Danish media links and transnational media spaces through social networking sites. Therefore, while we do not ascribe entirely to the 'cyber-optimist' camp, we see the potentiality of the Internet to facilitate political mobilization in general and a European public sphere in particular (Loader and Mercea, 2012).

The Internet also allows for political communication, and the public's consumption of political news, to bypass traditional power structures. SD are often portrayed negatively by other Swedish politicians and mainstream media channels, and our crawls found that the online discussions of SD were taking place through alternative media news aggregators and blogs criticizing Swedish immigration policy, the mainstream political parties and media,



and EU-integration. Furthermore, the unfiltered communicative nature of social networking sites and their pervasive central presence in our network analyses is promising as virtual public sphere meeting places. However, even if different voices and opinions congregate within social media it does not mean that they are in dialogue with one another. Issues of language and uneven access to technology (in, for example, post-accession countries) are obstacles to European public sphere despite the Internet's proclaimed low barriers to entry (cite). Indeed, analyses of social media usage may mirror our nationally-segmented Gephi visualization.

We have found that **ideology** played a role in shaping social networks online. Our maps reflect the existence of ideological party clusters among the Eurosceptics represented in the EP, with a clear distinction between right- and left-wing blocs. The European Conservatives and Reformists, a group of alter-European parties whose critique is moderate in intensity and aimed at the current structures of EU power rather than at the principle of integration per se, lies at the center of one such ideological cluster for right-wing EU-critics. It appears that ECR's more articulate ideology (combining, besides a critique of the current EU, social conservatism, free market liberalism and to some extent Christian Democratic principles) correlates with their more active social networking. The EFDD, the more anti-EU party group, was absent from our map. This could mean that disagreements within the far-right Eurosceptics go deeper and prevent them from interacting more intensively online. In addition, anti-EU MEPs have a more difficult position to negotiate, as they rip the benefits of (more money, more visibility) at the same time as they dispute the legitimacy of the institution that pays them. This ambiguity is reflected in the various strategies adopted by Eurosceptic MEPs, from large-scale absenteeism to strategic participation (Brack, 2012).

The most cohesive of the Eurosceptics were to be found however not on the right but on the left. As Figure 3 shows, the European Left (the European party) and the GUE/NGL party group display strong links with each other. Moreover, all the EL members linked strongly to the website of the party group, and many had also tight links with each other. This evidence suggests that a higher degree of ideological agreement fosters strong communication among and across the left-wing Eurosceptics (which in turn may itself strengthen their ideological commonalities). This confirms the results of earlier studies stating that left-wing parties have adapted well to the new conditions created by Europeanization: "There is hardly any evidence of parties of the left boycotting EP elections or adopting abstentionist policies if they won seats in the parliament" (Holmes and Lightfoot, 2007: 146). The current economic and social context defined by the Eurocrisis may have also played a role for the visible clustering of the European left, by providing a common enemy against whom they could coalesce.

Ideological convictions appear significant also for our test case, the Sweden Democrats. Looking at the first two visualizations (figures 1 and 2), it is noticeable that alternative media, SD's most significant links, and the party are held together by shared ideology. Even

when the arrows point in the direction of the most important critic of the Sweden Democrats, the website of the anti-racist organization Expo, the connection is grounded in ideological positions: SD and Expo take opposite standpoints on the same issue.

## 6. Conclusion, implications and directions for further research

This paper attempted to chart the social networks of the Sweden Democrats via a hyperlink analysis. We wanted to know which domestic and international actors are connected to the Sweden Democrats and how are they networked online.

Our findings show that the Sweden Democrats were not networked online, in particular lacking outlinks to any other webpages. If hyperlink networks are proxies for offline communication, this finding suggests that the Sweden Democrats are not networked within or outside the Sweden. The former can be explained by the lack of political parties associating with them, and a general societal stigmatization towards the party on account of their anti-immigration views within a pro-multicultural society. The lack of linkages outside Sweden can be explained by their low international presence, having only one MEP in the European Parliament and only relatively recently entering the Swedish parliament in 2010.

In our first and second crawls, the Issuecrawler identified a number of actors that linked to the Swedish Democrats but were not included in our starting points. The majority of these direct inlinks were alternative news sites and blogs, both of whom contained content or were built around an agenda criticizing Swedish immigration policy, the mainstream political parties and media, and EU-integration. Although most of these actors were based in Sweden, we did find a degree of internationalization with neighboring Denmark. This could be explained by the close ties between the Southern Swedish region of Scania, a once-Danish territory and Sweden Democrat stronghold.

We were also interested in the role of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) in linking the Sweden Democrats with other actors. We explored the possible facilitating role of the Internet in fostering a transnational communicative network of Eurosceptics.

In all of the crawls, social media sites like Youtube, Facebook, and especially Twitter were linchpins of the network. These sites were exclusively inlinked, and more often than not marked the core of the graph. Although we could not discern from the crawls the exact content of what was being said within these nodes, their importance is nevertheless highlighted by their central position. Their potential for a transnational communicative network across Europe is real.

Our findings point to the necessity of a more nuanced theoretical approach to Euroscepticism. Other literature has also posited that Euroscepticism should be classified as a matter of degree (Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008) and refined typologies have been developed,

but still finding an overwhelming ‘diffuse’ category, with the critique of the EU characterized as “ambiguous and incomplete, under-specified, unclear” (De Wilde et al., 2013: 9). This vagueness appears as a major obstacle in the cooperation of Eurosceptic parties of the right, but a more calibrated measurement of what defines their ideological position would help our understanding of the communication and collaboration of these parties.

Another area relevant for further theoretical exploration is the domestic – supranational linkage of the Eurosceptic political agendas. Beyond the empirical network mapping of the Swedish case, our study suggests that the Eurosceptic position of Sweden remains nationally bound, and we suggest that the Europeanization of a Eurosceptic public sphere will remain limited to national manifestations of protest politics where Europe is strategically politicized for domestic political purposes.

The most pressing theoretical issue that, according to our research, needs to be addressed is developing a better relationship between our technological toolkit and our social science theories. It is imperative to create new, sharper tools that meet the requirements demanded by Internet’s increasingly more complex architecture. Our most significant limitation lies with the Issuecrawler and its current incapacity to collect hyperlinks included in Javascript. Today’s webpages are written in a wide variety of programming languages (out of which Javascript is a major one), using a variety of syntaxes (such as Html5). Not being able to penetrate the content of these areas leaves out significant information and results in incomplete and inaccurate maps of hyperlink networks.

To give an example from our study, these technological limitations distorted the visualization of the relationships between the Eurosceptic parties seated in the EP as relayed in Figure 4. In that diagram, the True Finns are a clear outlier as they do not send any links to the core of the graphs (the social media sites Twitter, Facebook and YouTube). However, when we performed a manual check on their website the presence of direct links to both Twitter and Facebook was obvious, making the True Finns less of an outlier than our graph would lead to believe. It was clear that we were faced with a technical limitation that we, as non-developers, were not able to immediately address, but that undermined the very premises of our research: that the software we used delivered accurate representations of the hyperlink relations.

An even more problematic technological limitation (and evidence for the complexity of webpage design) was found on the homepage of our test case, the Sweden Democrats. Through the use of a ‘captcha’ the site prevented all non-human access originating from outside Scandinavia. We realized this limitation only after all the crawls had been performed, but it casts a strong shadow of a doubt over the accuracy of the SD network map. This issue may also be present in the case of any of the webpages encountered by the crawler during our research. In the absence of a human, manual check, results obtained via this method are highly questionable.

We call then for a tighter collaboration between disciplines (data and information science, mathematics, sociology, media & communication and political science) in order to explore more thoroughly the possibilities opened for social sciences by the Internet and associated communication technologies.

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